

Town of Avalon
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
East of Garden State Parkway at
East end of County Road 601
Avalon
Cape May County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1045

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOWN OF AVALON

HABS
NJ
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2-

HABS No. NJ-1045

Location: New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, East of Garden State Parkway at East end of County Road 601, Avalon, Seven Mile Beach, Cape May County, New Jersey

Significance: Avalon is representative of the resorts which developed along the Cape May barrier islands in anticipation of the arrival of the West Jersey and Seashore railroad, in the 1880s.

History: Seven Mile Beach, the longest of the southern barrier islands, became a resort in 1887 when the Seven Mile Beach Company established Avalon. Originally three separate communities, named Avalon, Peermont and Holiday Beach, they consolidated and Avalon was incorporated in 1891. The name Avalon was taken from Welsh mythology, and alludes to the place where heroes, including the legendary King Arthur, went after death. Avalon offered dramatic sand dunes and a good deal of potential. Two years after its founding, the company granted the West Jersey Railroad the right to lay tracks the entire length of the island, connecting to the Cape May main line. The line was further extended into Stone Harbor three years later.¹ By then, the Avalon Hotel, located near Townsend Inlet at the north end of the city, had already been open for a season. The hotel and twelve model cottages were the product of the railroad's demand for token buildings illustrating projected development. The Hotel Peermont was also constructed at the railroad's request for guests' accommodations.²

As early as 1888, just a year after its founding, Avalon attracted "excursions" to its newly opened beaches.

The excursion arrived with thirteen well filled coaches (of 700 excursionists from Philadelphia) for the beach, and picnic groves of Peermont. During the Summer Season the daily excursion train always had two engines and about twelve cars. Over week-ends, trains with as many as three sections each with fifteen to seventeen cars, and pulled by as many as two or three engines, came into the five stations of the island filling all the available sidings with cars and engines and unloading as many as 4000 to 5000 holidayers to enjoy Avalons' picnic groves, beaches and rustic. It is said that many times on these excursions, lots were bought and sold by speculators.³

A few years later, the Avalon boardwalk, first constructed at the "Leamings" train stop about 1890, provided another means of entertainment. Built on pilings nearly submerged at high tide, the boardwalk became a well-known fishing spot. Sportsmen

¹ Pupils of Stone Harbor School, A History of Stone Harbor, New Jersey (n.p., 1926), 9.

² Agnew R. Ewing, A Brief History of Avalon (n.p., n.d.)

³ Ewing.

from Philadelphia would purchase a \$1.00 round-trip ticket to Avalon and spend the day catching drum fish and croakers. Bait and other necessities were conveniently sold at Emma Highfield's store at 32nd Street and the Boardwalk.⁴ Beginning in 1914, casinos brought other activities to the waterfront. The first, housed a novelty store and an ice cream stand facing the walk, and a movie theater capable of seating 500 on the ocean side. The more elaborate casino built at 17th Street and the boardwalk a few years later contained a barber shop, a ski ball alley, a pool room and a concession stand. Above these, the "Marine Room," equipped with brick fireplaces on either end, overlooked the ocean and displayed marine reflections across its mirrored rear wall. The casino also furnished boardwalk visitors with a dance hall, theater and bathing facilities. In 1928 the building was destroyed and replaced with a modern version.⁵

While an alternative to the more populated larger resorts during the first half of the twentieth century, by the late 1950s, Avalon experienced an increase in building and "hundreds of new homes filled vacant land where dunes and marshlands had been."⁶ Today, new commercial and condominium developments are visible from Dune Drive, the main road connecting Stone Harbor and Avalon. At the north end of the island, Commodore Bay Marina integrates private homes into a "waterfront community" furnished with private docks. Despite such development, Avalon has preserved a large portion of the natural vegetation-covered dunes protecting its wide beaches. Visitors follow curving paths through the dense undergrowth and over the dunes, emerging at the top of a wide stretch of sand.

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Sources: Boyer, George F., and Cunningham, J. Pearson. Cape May County Story. Avalon: Avalon Publishing Co., 1975.

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⁴ Ewing, 15.

⁵ Ewing, 15-18.

⁶ George F. Boyer and J. Pearson Cunningham, Cape May County Story (Avalon: Avalon Publishing Company, 1975), 59-60.

Project Information:

This project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of HABS historian Sara Amy Leach, project supervisor. Three historians completed the research during summer 1991: Field supervisor Sarah Allaback (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Alfred Holden (University of Vermont), and Camille Gatz (North Carolina). David Ames (University of Delaware) made the large-format photographs. Historian, Elizabeth Harris May (George Washington University), edited the HABS reports.